Asassin Study - Study 01.5

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Мария Снайдер

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Maria V. Snyder

Assassin Study

- [Study 01.5] -

Chapter One

Valek gazed at the mess on Mogkan's desk and sighed. It would take him days to go through all the papers, but Commander Ambrose wanted him to fully investigate the extent of Mogkan's involvement in General Brazell's plans to seize control of the Territory of Ixia. Plans that had been thwarted. With Brazell incarcerated and Mogkan dead, only the tiresome chore of tying up the loose ends remained.

As he scanned the various documents and notes on the desk, Valek was sickened by the details of horror Mogkan had wrought on the orphans in Brazell's care. It was a wonder Yelena survived Mogkan's magical torture. And it troubled Valek greatly that a rogue Sitian magician could live in Ixia for fourteen years without his knowledge. The fact that Brazell had sheltered Mogkan was no excuse. Valek was the chief of security for all of Ixia; it was his responsibility to know these things. Children had been tormented.

Valek's thoughts returned to Yelena. An icy finger of loneliness touched the emptiness inside him. She was in Sitia, where she needed to be to learn about her magical powers, but she had taken his heart with her.

Cursing himself for being melodramatic, he concentrated on the grim task at hand. An unfamiliar name—T. Daviian—was written multiple times on various papers. When he found the line *T. Daviian—My Love—paid 6 golds,* Valek guessed T. Daviian had been the Sitian assassin who had poisoned the Commander's drink with My Love during the trade treaty negotiations. Daviian was the name of a plateau in Sitia. As far as Valek knew, the plateau was uninhabited.

A knock interrupted his musings. "Come in," he called.

Ari opened the door and entered.

"How's Janco?" Valek asked. Ari's partner had gotten skewered with a sword during the battle to free the Commander from Mogkan's magical control.

"Driving the nurses crazy. This morning he pretended to be dead. When the night nurse reached for him, he grabbed her arm." Ari shook his head.

"Good to hear he's feeling better. Do you have a report?"

"Yes, sir. All of General Brazell's aides have been accounted for. The Commander is conducting interviews with them." A glint of appreciation flashed in Ari's pale blue eyes. "It's amazing how the Commander can get a confession from an advisor using silence. I felt compelled to confess all my boyhood crimes during the deadly quiet."

"How many advisors were involved with Brazell's plans?"

"Two so far. We've stopped for lunch."

Valek doubted they would find more. His spies hadn't picked up on the illicit activity, which usually meant a small number of people were involved. Either that or his scouts had been compromised. An

intensive investigation into his intelligence network would be prudent before he could trust anyone besides Ari and Janco.

"What's the status on Brazell's soldiers?" Valek asked.

"Everyone on the roster is accounted for."

"Good." From the uncertain expression on Ari's face, Valek knew the man was troubled. "Something else?"

"Yes." Ari paused as if debating what he should say. "Our initial count of General Brazell's army had one extra person, but when we matched names to the list, it worked out."

"Perhaps a servant or an aide was counted by mistake?"

"That's what I thought, too. But…"

Valek waited. He, too, knew the value of silence.

Ari flinched as if he suspected his next words would anger Valek. "I've heard rumors in the guard house. There's been a lot of boasting about who's going to murder Yelena."

Which was expected. There was no love for her among Brazell's people; she had killed his only child, Reyad, and had played a major part in the General's arrest. "Go on."

"The boasts have stopped, but bets are now being made on when Tam will kill her."

"Who's Tam?"

"A lieutenant. That's all I know."

T. Daviian? Valek wondered. A Sitian assassin? "Is Tam on the roster?"

"No."

"When did the bets start?"

"This morning. Orders?"

"Get me more information about Tam. Don't be subtle."

"Yes, sir." Ari saluted and hurried from the room.

Valek abandoned his task and dashed to the stables to check if there were any horses missing. All was quiet. Perhaps Brazell's guilty advisors would have some information.

He returned to Brazell's manor house. The sprawling building resembled a minicastle, and Valek remembered the King of Ixia's brother used to live there before the Commander's takeover. The Prince had been just as corrupt as his brother, and Valek had had the pleasure of assassinating him as well as the entire royal family.

Valek headed to the dungeons. Unfortunately he was familiar with the location and layout of the underground cell, but he couldn't suppress a grin. Even though they had been locked within the foul

darkness, he and Yelena had found a moment of pure joy.

One of the Commander's aides intercepted him. "The Commander wishes to see you, sir." When

Valek hesitated, the aide said, "Now."

Impatient with the delay in his investigation, Valek rushed to the Commander's office. Ambrose had commandeered Brazell's workplace. He had stripped the opulent decorations from the room, but kept the broad ebony desk and high-back leather chair.

"Valek." The Commander gestured him closer. "Why didn't you tell me you've assigned an assassin?"

"For what?"

Ambrose's powerful gaze bored into Valek. Most people would be reduced to a quivering mess by the Commander's ire. Valek remained unaffected.

"Yelena. The order for her execution is gone," the Commander said.

Fear coiled around Valek's throat. "I didn't assign anyone. When did you last see the order?"

"You were *supposed* to assign—"

"When!"

Ambrose said nothing. Valek drew in a deep breath. "I apologize, sir."

"The order was on my desk this morning. It wasn't there when I returned from lunch. If one of your assassins didn't accept the order, then who did?"

"Permission to find out, sir?"

The Commander contemplated. Valek willed his body to keep still.

"She's safe in Sitia, Valek. The order only applies if she's found in Ixia."

Unless it was a Sitian assassin after her. He lacked proof but, he vowed, not for long.

"Permission granted. You're dismissed."

With time running out, Valek searched for Ari; he found him in the soldier's barracks. Ari's strong hands were wrapped around a guard's neck. The trapped man's face turned purple.

"Report," Valek ordered.

"Just having a nice chat with my friend. Seems Tam had been recruited from Sitia by Mogkan and, out of a misguided sense of duty, is now after Yelena," Ari said. "My friend was on the verge of divulging *when* Tam left. Right?" He relaxed his grip.

"About…two…hours…ago," the man said, gasping for air.

Yelena was in danger. A second of mind-numbing panic and worry gripped Valek, but he suppressed all emotion. He needed to

think and plan.

Tam was on foot with a two-hour head start, traveling due south. The assassin was still in Ixia. On horseback, Valek could arrive at the border before Tam and set up an ambush, or he could follow Tam into Sitia and find out more about the assassin's intentions.

Chapter Two

Valek made his decision. He informed Ari of his plans and hurried to the stables. According to the stable master, Onyx was the fastest horse in the barn. Valek spurred the aptly named all-black horse into a gallop when they exited the manor house's grounds, heading south to the Snake Forest.

The thrumming vibrations from Onyx's hooves echoed in Valek's chest. He worried over being too late and missing the assassin. Any delay would put Yelena in lethal danger.

Snake Forest was a thin strip of green that undulated from east to west between the northern Territory of Ixia and the southern lands of Sitia. The official border was located about one hundred feet past the Snake Forest's southern edge.

Valek knew the border's location presented myriad problems for both countries' border patrols, but he had used the cover of the forest to his advantage many times. And today would be no different.

He arrived at Military District 5's (MD–5) patrol station in the heart of the forest two hours before sunset. Just enough time for him to get into position.

"Sir?" The station's captain stood at attention.

"A person of interest is going to attempt to cross the border tonight," Valek said.

"Should we increase our patrols?"

"Yes, but not in section twelve. And I want your guards to be visible, but not be obvious about being visible."

"Sir?"

"I want your soldiers to herd the person toward the unguarded section so I can mark him and follow him into Sitia. Understand?"

"Yes, sir!"

By sunset, the beefed-up patrol made subtle noises along the edge of Snake Forest, and Valek, wearing a camouflaged jumpsuit over a Sitian disguise, waited in section twelve. His current location was based on logic. If he planned to cross the border without being detected, this tight deer path would make a perfect route.

Crouched on a tree branch, he smiled at a memory. When Yelena had played the role of a fugitive in this forest, she had glued Cheketo leaves on her uniform shirt to cover the bright red color. Her homemade camouflage worked, and she had been able to elude capture during the day-long exercise.

Then, she had been aware that soldiers searched for her; a lone assassin would have the element of surprise. If Valek couldn't mark

Tam, he would find Yelena and track her until she was no longer in danger. He huffed in amusement. She had the unique ability to attract danger even when in benign situations. Perhaps he should amend his plan and just watch her until he neutralized the assassin.

Darkness settled over the forest. Calls of an owl and the hum of insects punctured the silence. A furtive rustling in the underbrush drew his attention. He studied the area and soon spotted a figure. The person clung to the shadows and, at Valek's distance, it was impossible to see his face in the gloom. A skilled opponent.

The assassin ghosted under Valek's tree. Valek waited for a few heartbeats before easing to the ground and following the assassin. Part of him was pleased that he had guessed right, but another part worried over the ease with which he found Tam. Occupational hazard, he supposed. Without the habit of analyzing every situation from all angles, he wouldn't be alive.

By daybreak, the assassin had crossed the border. Valek stopped for a moment to wash the camouflage paint from his face and to hide his jumpsuit. He darkened his pale skin to match the tanner Sitian hues, and smoothed his white cotton tunic and sand-colored pants. Pulling his shoulder-length black hair back, Valek tied it. The heat would increase each day until it reached unbearable levels. Sitia wasn't the best place to be during the hot season.

The assassin headed toward a small village in Sitia's Moon Clan lands. Surrounded by farms, the village contained one inn and a single tavern, which Tam entered. Valek circled the building. Only one exit. He waited a few minutes before going inside.

Animated conversation filled the tavern. A joyous mood rippled through the crowded room and it wasn't long before Valek heard snatches of the stories.

"Fourth Magician, Irys Jewelrose…"

"Ten children!"

"Kidnapped from us. Taken north…"

"Fourteen years!"

"Rescued from right under the Commander's nose…"

"Soldiers chased them across the border…"

"Fourth Magician saved their lives!"

"Returning them home…"

Already exaggerated, the stories failed to mention the Ixians' help or that a rogue *Sitian* magician had started the trouble in the first place, but the gossip did reveal Irys and Yelena's next stop—Fulgor, the Moon Clan's capital.

Traveling with a large party, Yelena's progress would be slower than that of a single person. They had left yesterday morning, and it would take them two days to reach Fulgor, where they would

probably stay and search for families who had lost a child.

It appeared the assassin was in no hurry to catch up. Tam remained at the bar until nightfall, talking with a few locals and drinking ale. Valek paid his bill, and waited outside to avoid suspicion. When Tam left and checked into the inn, he seemed relaxed and showed no signs of being aware of Valek's presence.

Valek managed to get the room next to Tam's. He would have liked to do a little investigating, but couldn't leave Tam alone. During the long hours of the evening, Valek wished he had brought Ari with him.

Eventually he dozed in a chair by the wall he shared with Tam. Each slight noise roused him from sleep. In the middle of the night, Valek woke on his feet. He crouched with his sword in hand without any memory of moving. All was quiet. He sheathed his weapon.

"Hel…" a muffled voice sounded outside.

Valek glanced out the window in time to see four men drag a woman from a house. The men carried the struggling victim down the street.

He paused for an instant. At one time in his life, he would have ignored the woman's plight and stayed focused on the assassin. But not now. Not since Yelena entered his life. And never again.

Valek opened the window and shimmied down the drain pipe. He pulled his sword and raced after the four men. They cut down a small side street and entered a warehouse on the left. A few shrill screams escaped before the door shut, the click of the lock audible in the sudden silence.

Peering through a dirt-streaked window, Valek saw the men lift the woman onto a table. Just enough moonlight reached inside to glint off a knife held above the victim. No time left to consider all options.

Valek yanked his picks from his breast pocket and popped the lock in seconds. Rushing into the building, he grabbed the nearest man and flung him to the ground, knocking him unconscious with his fist.

The three remaining men drew their swords; ringing steel echoed. The woman jumped to her feet on the table, brandishing a long knife. Triumphant smiles spread on *all* their faces.

Ambush.

Valek looked over his shoulder. Six more armed men sidled behind him. When his gaze returned to the original group, there were two more. Twelve against one. Bad odds, but not impossible. Crates and equipment littered the room, ropes and pulleys hung from the ceiling and broken windows could all be employed for his purposes.

"You're under arrest," the woman said.

“On what charge?” Valek asked.

“Espionage, assassination, trespassing. Take your pick.”

Valek considered. If arrested, he could escape later when he had better odds.

“Will you surrender?” she asked.

Chapter Three

A fight against twelve would be impossible in normal circumstances, but the littered and uneven terrain of the warehouse tipped the odds in Valek's favor. Plus the delay of having to escape from jail if he surrendered could put Yelena in greater danger.

He sheathed his sword. The ambushers surrounding him relaxed slightly. Good.

"No," he said to the woman. "I won't surrender."

Valek jumped onto the table. The woman—who had played the part of victim so well—stabbed her long knife at his chest. He grinned as he turned sideways, letting the blade go past him, then grabbed her arm. Knife fighting was his forte, but he wouldn't have time for a proper match. Pity.

Instead he twisted her wrist. The knife clattered to the table. Valek spun her and dropped her onto

the men who crowded around them. He leaped and seized a rope hanging from the rafters then swung over to a pile of wooden crates.

His plan had been to climb down the crates and dive through the broken ground-floor window, but the other men rushed to intercept him. The attackers swarmed like bees. They yelled and called to each other. Too many. Valek knew it was only a matter of time.

Change of plans. He reached for the rope and pulled himself above the swordsmen's range. The rope ended at the underside of a catwalk near the ceiling. Valek grasped the edge of the walk and hauled himself up. He lay on his stomach and surveyed the situation.

The building was only three stories high. A wooden staircase clung to the back wall of the warehouse. Boots pounded and dust fogged the air as the ambushers rushed up the stairs. Four men remained at the base of the rope. Smart.

Valek crawled to the edge of the catwalk and hopped down to the third-floor landing. He ran to the closest window, hoping for a way down. Otherwise he would have to surrender.

Using the hilt of his sword, he shattered the windowpane. He smiled when he saw the fire escape. The drumming of his pursuers' footsteps grew louder as Valek stepped onto the metal staircase. The men shouted to their companions on the ground floor.

It wasn't the clatter of feet above him that made Valek pause about halfway down but the loud metallic groan. He looked up in time to see two more men push out onto the fire escape.

Top heavy and rusted through, the staircase screeched and broke away from the building. Valek braced himself, but the jolt shook him

loose. And his forehead slammed into the edge of a stair when it bounced.

By the time he regained his wits, he was entangled in the fire escape and surrounded by three armed men. Their sword tips hovered mere inches from his chest and throat. Before he could say a word, another man came close and the last thing Valek saw was the dangerous end of a club.

* * *

Stabbing pain woke Valek. His head felt as if a blacksmith was using it as an anvil. Every muscle in his body ached and a fire burned along his shoulders and back. His arms quivered with strain until he realized he was hanging from his wrists. He positioned his feet under him and stood. Chains clanked as he moved.

With his feet chained to the floor and his arms chained to the ceiling, Valek could only shift a few inches. He glanced around the cell. Carved from stone, it had one man-made wall with iron bars. The lock on the door was recognizable. Easy to pop if he could get at it.

He wore his own clothes and knew, even if the guards had done a thorough search, he still had a few toys left. No one has been able to find everything he carried. So far.

He would have to wait for an opportunity to escape. Unfortunately his jailers wouldn't give him any openings. They refused to speak to him. They squirted water into his mouth, standing at a distance even though he was chained. Their actions alarmed him. Usually once he was in a cell, his captors were overconfident and made mistakes.

The reason for their caution became clear when Valek had his first visitor.

"I should hire a painter so I'll always have a picture to remind me of your pathetic predicament," Tam

said. Pure malicious glee lit his grey eyes. His black hair was braided into one long rope down his back. "I've warned them about you, but I really didn't think it would be *this* easy. You've lost your edge. Gone soft. The old Valek wouldn't have risked himself for a woman."

"I've no regrets," Valek said.

Tam huffed in amusement. "We'll see if you feel the same way when the noose is tied around your neck."

"Still angry over the lack of work in Ixia, Tamequintin?" Now that he could see him up close, Valek recognized the man. Tam had been a popular and well-paid assassin for the Ixian monarchy and a colleague of Valek's. When the Commander gained control of Ixia, Tam hadn't been content to be Valek's second in command. He disappeared soon after.

“I never lack for work. In fact, a certain magician paid me very well to come to Ixia and deal with a problem for him.”

“Mogkan’s dead.”

“True. But it was the first real challenge I’ve had in a long, long time. And yet I was very disappointed.” Tam gestured to Valek. “Captured with the first effort.”

“So all this was for me?” Relief pulsed though him and he almost laughed.

“Initially, yes. Then I heard about an order of execution sitting idle on the Commander’s desk. If I was going to get rid of you, then the Commander would need a new security chief. How better to show the Commander my unique qualifications by assassinating his former food taster?”

“The order isn’t valid in Sitia,” Valek said. His heart rate increased. Yelena remained in danger.

“But it will showcase my knowledge and contacts in Sitia so well, I’m sure the Commander will understand. And I’m sure you’ll understand if I don’t hang around to gloat during your hanging. I’ve hunting to do.” Tam made to leave, but paused. “The authorities are well aware of your abilities, so they won’t transfer you to the Citadel for a public execution. Instead the Sitian Councilors and Master Magicians are coming here. Enjoy your short stay.” Tam waved jauntily and left the cell.

Frustration coursed through Valek’s blood. He should have brought backup with him. He could have sent Ari after Tam, keeping Yelena safe.

Should haves and could haves wouldn’t help him. Pulling on the chains didn’t work, but it was better than just standing there.

The day passed slowly. Muffled sounds of hammering reached him, grating on his nerves. The town probably had to build gallows. His guards kept their distance, and Valek realized his only chance to escape would be when they took him to be hanged.

Later that night, a second shift of guards came on duty. But when one of the guard’s came into the cell, Valek felt magic. Even though he was immune to magic’s effects, he sensed it as if the air in his cell had thickened and pressed against his skin.

The guard was a woman, but she used her magic to disguise herself as a man. Valek saw through the illusion.

“I can help you escape,” she whispered, “but you have to promise to do one thing for me in

exchange.”

“What do you want?”

“Promise first.”

“I won’t harm or endanger Yelena, and she’s my *first* priority.”

“The promise has nothing to do with her. Time is not a factor. Will you promise?”

Chapter Four

Valek considered the woman's offer. He'd been in worse situations over the years, but now time was a critical factor. He couldn't wait until the perfect opportunity to escape arose. Not when an assassin hunted Yelena.

"I promise," he said.

The magician's tight expression eased, and she flashed him a smile of relief. Moving quickly, she unlocked the metal cuffs on Valek's wrists and ankles. He rubbed his arms as a stinging pain rushed through them.

"Here." She handed him a set of lock picks. "Wait about ten minutes before you use them. I'll distract the others when you get to the guard room, and rendezvous with you on the road to Fulgor."

"Hurry up, Justus," a guard yelled. "My tea's getting cold."

She turned to go.

"Hold on. What's the promise?" Valek said.

"No time. Later."

"At least tell me your *real* name."

She paused by the cell's door. "Ziva." Her voice was a whisper. "Ziva Moon." Slipping through the door, she pulled it shut behind her. The loud clang echoed in the stone cell, followed by the distinct click of the lock.

Valek spent the next ten minutes stretching to return flexibility to his stiff muscles. His stomach rumbled with hunger, and he tried to ignore the pangs. Instead, he focused on the task at hand—escaping.

The cell's lock popped without trouble. Easing open the door, he glanced down the prison's hallway. Empty. For now. One of the disadvantages of being brought in unconscious, Valek didn't know the layout of the building. However, most prisons had the same basic design—cells underground and a guard room between them and freedom.

Valek turned left and moved without sound. A few cells were occupied; soft snores floated on the damp air. The hallway ended at a staircase. Lantern light flickered through iron bars that blocked the top of the steps. A thick metal plate covered the locking mechanism, leaving only a slender hole for the bolt's key. He heard murmured voices and chuckles. The guard room.

Valek listened for a while. He counted six separate guards. Climbing the rough stone staircase, he calculated how quickly the guards would notice him working on the lock. With luck, Ziva would divert their attention long enough for him to open the door. He peered

through the bars. Five heavily armed men occupied the room, which appeared to be the office, as well.

Ziva remained in disguise. She met Valek's gaze and nodded. Walking over to the window, she glanced out. Magic pulsed in the air. She grunted with effort. After a few moments, she cried out in alarm, "The gallows are on fire."

The men rushed to the window, and Valek opened the lock during the commotion. He waited. Orders shouted, three men raced from the office, leaving two men and Ziva behind. She slumped under the window. The sticky feel of magic vanished as the illusion disguising the magician disappeared.

"Justus, what's the matter?" One of the guards hurried over to her.

Valek eased through the door.

"What the—"

Using the guard's shock over discovering Ziva wearing Justus's uniform, Valek rammed into the man and pulled the guard's club from his weapon belt as he fell. A temple strike later and the guard ceased to move. Valek turned in time to engage the remaining guard.

Club against sword would be horrible odds if the guard had any refined skills. Fortunately for Valek, only two quick moves were required to render the man unconscious.

Without thought, Valek scooped Ziva from the floor and rested her slight weight over his left shoulder. He grabbed a sword, then dashed outside.

Bright orange lit the night sky as fire consumed the gallows. Crazed activity surrounded the blaze as the townspeople tried to organize a bucket brigade. Valek smiled at the scene before slipping unnoticed into the shadows.

Once the sky began to lighten, he stopped to rest. He had traveled west through the forest, paralleling the road to Fulgor.

Ziva stirred when he laid her on the ground. Long brown strands of hair had escaped from her tight bun. She pushed them aside and squinted at their surroundings. Her pale blue eyes widened as she made a realization.

"Not the rendezvous location you've hoped for?" he asked.

"Why didn't you leave me there? If I was arrested, you…" She swallowed.

"Wouldn't have to keep my promise?"

She nodded.

"A tactical decision. I'd already managed to get into enough trouble without having a backup plan. I hoped perhaps you could help me again."

"How?"

“Your knowledge of Sitia for one. And your magical abilities.”

“Limited,” she said. “I thought I could light a fire and keep my disguise, but the effort exhausted me. You might want another partner.”

When Valek didn’t reply, she continued, “So I help you in exchange for my rescue? And your promise?”

“Still valid. Although I am curious what I have promised to do.” He waited while she fidgeted with the buttons on her uniform.

“A very powerful magician has taken my child, and I want you to get her for me.” His surprise must have showed because she rushed to explain. “He is…was my husband. His love and affection for me ceased and transferred to her the moment she was born. After that day, he viewed me solely as a breeding mare, coming at night, demanding…” She drew in a steadying breath. “Eventually I ran away.”

“The authorities?” Valek asked.

“I had no legal recourse. He accused me of abandoning the family, being a bad mother. No one believed me.”

“You want me to kill him?”

“No! I just want my child.”

“But he’ll come after you. You said he was powerful.”

“I’ll figure it out. I just can’t pierce the magical protection he has surrounding her, but you can.”

Valek mulled over the situation. The rescue of her daughter would be relatively easy and would honor his promise, but he doubted she would know how to disappear properly so her husband couldn’t find her. It would be a challenge. One that he would enjoy.

Ziva had been watching his face. “You’ll help me, right?”

“Of course. Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“To Fulgor. I have an assassin to stop.” He pulled her upright and they followed the main road to Fulgor.

They arrived in town near dusk. Once he had ascertained Tam hadn’t caught up to Yelena, Valek rented a room at Staffa’s Star Inn and ordered a large meal. After eating, Ziva went in search of information on Yelena’s group while Valek contacted his spies. He had assigned three members of his corps to every major city of Sitia and had six members living inside the Citadel. The spies kept an eye on the cities and reported any interesting news to Valek.

One of the Fulgor spies had seen Tam near dawn.

“I recognized him from the old days,” Lysa said. “Thought he might cause trouble and tailed him to see what his plans were. He bought a horse and had asked the stable owner for directions to Delip. Then he left town.”

“Where’s Delip?” Valek asked.

“In the foothills of the Emerald Mountains. A small Cloudmist Clan village.”

“How do you get there?”

“The best way is to follow the border of the Avibian Plains east until you reach the mountains, then head south. It’s faster to cut through the Avibian Plains, but no one goes that way.”

“Why not?”

“Sandseeds. They live on the plains and don’t like strangers. Their protective magic attacks are unwelcome to travelers, confusing their sense of direction until they die of thirst.”

Lysa gave Valek a map, and he thanked her. He met up with Ziva at the inn.

“Fourth Magician and Yelena are headed for Delip,” she said. “They left around midmorning. Seems one of the girls may have family there.”

Interesting. Tam had left ahead of the group. He told Ziva about Tam’s actions. She thought for a moment and said, “Yelena will be nicely protected on the road to Delip. It’s not well traveled and no towns are along the way. Fourth Magician will know if a stranger is within a mile of them.”

So Tam planned to ambush them in Delip. On horseback he would arrive in plenty of time to prepare.

Unless Valek used the shortcut through the plains and set his own ambush for Tam. Or he could catch up to Yelena and warn her.

Chapter Five

"How much time will we save if we cut through the Avibian Plains on horseback?" Valek asked Ziva.

"None. The Sandseed Clan's magic will…" The skin between her eyebrows creased as she thought. "It won't affect you, but it will confuse me. Unless your immunity to magic extends to someone with you?"

"It doesn't, but I can tie your reins to my saddle to keep you close. Will that work?"

"I guess. As long as we don't run into Sandseeds."

Ziva estimated they would save a full day by traveling through the plains to the town of Delip. After securing horses and saddles from Valek's Fulgor spies, they left the city.

At the border of the plains, they stopped to attach her reins to his horse. The plains' long grass and rolling terrain stretched before them.

"Head directly southeast. In a day you'll see the Emerald Mountains, and if you continue southeast for another, it will bring us right to Delip," Ziva said.

When they crossed the border, Valek felt the sticky strands of the Sandseeds' protective magic trying to find a weak spot; moving through the magical barrier required effort.

Ziva's emotions cycled from confusion to panic to paranoia. She kept insisting they were going the wrong way. When she tried to dismount in midstride, Valek halted the horses and tied her down to her saddle. By the time evening descended, he wished he had left her behind. Not able to trust her to stay with him, he pricked her with one of his darts after they ate dinner. The sleeping juice worked fast, and he faced a quiet night.

Unfortunately, it was too quiet. Valek had been dozing next to their campfire when the insects ceased humming. The heavy pressure of magic lifted.

He listened for a moment. The soft slide of legs brushing along grass stalks sounded to his left. The muted crunch of bare feet on sand came from his right.

When a bowstring creaked, Valek rolled. An arrow slammed into the ground where he had just been. Once he was away from the firelight, Valek stopped. He pulled his knife and crouched low in the grass, scanning the plains.

Three dark figures approached him; the weak moonlight glinted from their scimitars. Two others stood to his right near the campfire. Another creak sounded behind him. Valek spun in time to see a person

loose an arrow. He dodged, but it nicked his shoulder. He glanced left. Two more men; eight in all. No time to play nice.

Valek yanked a dart from his belt and flicked it at the figure with the bow and arrow. He didn't wait for the potion to work before rushing the injured man. Knocking him flat, Valek kept going. He needed to be clear of the circle of attackers to counter so many opponents.

Stopping abruptly, he swung around and threw another dart at the closest man before pulling his sword. As the man collapsed, two of his companions reached Valek, swinging their scimitars at his head. He fought them until they dropped to the ground in exhaustion.

The remaining four figures waited out of range. Confused, Valek peered at them. Why hadn't they joined in the fight?

"Excellent," a man's deep voice said. "You fought despite the odds."

"Which could have been worse," Valek said, gesturing to the four.

"That would have been unfair."

"And attacking me in the middle of the night wasn't?"

"No. You are trespassing on our lands." He stepped closer. A foot taller than Valek, his onyx-colored skin was bare. Glancing at Ziva's prone form, he frowned and magic pulsed in the air. Ziva stirred.

"We thought we would have to fight both of you." Powerful muscles sculpted the Sandseed's body. "Why are you here, Ghost Warrior?"

"Ghost?"

"Magic does not see you, therefore you cause a dead space in our protective web. Tell me why we should not exterminate you?"

"Because he is on a Jaydai Quest," Ziva said, coming to and sitting up.

"He is not Sandseed," their leader said. "It does not apply to him."

"The quest is for a Sandseed cousin," she said.

"Is he worthy of the honor?" The big man closed his eyes. A bubble of magic exploded from him.

Knives rained from the air, all headed toward Valek. With a combination of instinct, skill and luck, he dodged, ducked and deflected the blades. His arms stung with multiple cuts, but he suffered no major injuries.

The Sandseed smiled. "A true warrior. Go with our goodwill and save our Zaltana cousin."

The visitors left without sound. Valek waited for the return of the protective magic, but the air remained clear.

"Do I want to know what a Jaydai Quest is?" Valek asked Ziva.

"No. It's better you don't."

"Interesting people."

“You have no idea.”

They encountered no more trouble as they finished their journey to Delip. The immense snowcapped Emerald Mountains formed a gorgeous backdrop to the tiny town. A quick survey revealed Tam hadn’t arrived yet. They rushed to set their plan in motion.

* * *

His disguise in place, locals paid off and Ziva on lookout, Valek mucked out the stables with no qualms. All was ready.

When Ziva slipped through the side door and hid, he continued to fill the wheelbarrow with soiled straw. The drumming of hooves grew louder and stopped. A creak of leather and a jingle of metal indicated the rider dismounted. Valek scooped another shovelful.

“Boy, come get this saddle,” Tam ordered. Annoyance laced his voice.

Valek turned. His disguise was adequate, but wouldn’t hold under close scrutiny. “Sorry, sir. Busy day.” He rushed to loosen the straps.

Ignoring him, Tam scanned the almost-filled stables. “Got some visitors, I see. Anything new?” His tone was casual, but Valek could sense the tension.

“Yes, sir. You missed the commotion.”

Tam’s gaze snapped to him. “Really?”

“Yes, sir. The infamous Valek was spotted nearby last night. Caused a panic.”

The assassin’s confusion lasted a mere second before he drew his sword. “Are you sure it was him, *boy?*”

Tam’s skills with a sword were formidable. Valek didn’t care to engage him in a sword fight. And he held far too much respect for his old colleague not to allow him a fair match. So Valek stared past Tam’s shoulders and let fear show on his face as he backed up.

Too smart to turn his back on Valek, Tam smirked. “Come on, give me a little credit.”

“Why should I, Tam?” Ziva said in Valek’s voice. She stood behind the assassin. Tam shifted to the side so he could see both of them. Ziva’s magic thickened the air. She looked and sounded exactly like Valek. Her special skill.

“You ambushed me with twelve locals. I figured your one-on-one skills have gotten rusty.” Ziva brandished a sword.

Tam immediately forgot about the “stable boy” and stepped to meet her attack. Valek moved. Coming from behind, he pressed his knife into Tam’s throat.

“Drop your weapon,” Valek said.

Tam’s sword clattered to the ground. Ziva picked it up and released her disguise. The assassin grunted with surprise. Valek pushed him away and threw a knife at him.

Snatching it from the air, Tam grinned. “Cocky aren’t you? Considering *I* taught you everything *you* know about knife fighting.”

They circled each other, searching for an opening. Well matched, Tam countered his thrusts with ease. Then Valek stepped up the pace, increasing the speed of his attacks. Tam scrambled to block.

“Yelena has taught me a few tricks,” Valek said as he followed a jab with a spinning kick, knocking Tam’s knife from his hand.

“Wait,” Tam panted. He pulled a folded paper from his pocket. “Yelena’s execution order. Take it. I won’t go after her again.”

“I know you won’t.” Valek’s arm blurred as he threw his knife into Tam’s throat.

The assassin gurgled once and collapsed.

“Ziva, could you take the paper and put it in my saddlebags?”

She shot him a questioning glance, but he wasn’t about to explain his unwillingness to touch the order.

“Time to go,” he said. “We should be well away before Yelena’s group arrives.”

Shock bleached Ziva’s face. “Don’t you want to see her? Tell her…?”

Valek wanted to see Yelena more than anything. His arms ached with the desire to hold her. Yet he knew her focus should be on learning about her magical powers, and he was needed elsewhere. He would see her again. Of that, Valek was certain.

He grinned. “No. I have a promise to keep.”

The End